

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT

ANNUAL REPORT



**Rawlins Field Office
Rawlins, Wyoming**

April 2000

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I. INTRODUCTION

Three types of environmental documents are summarized in the pages to follow: environmental impact statements (EISs), environmental assessments (EAs), and categorical exclusions (CXs). These three categories of documents make up the majority of BLM documents required for fulfilling the substantive environmental goals set forth in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The documents listed may or may not be completed to-date. Environmental impact statements generally take 18 to 24 months to complete and are lengthy documents requiring formal public review. An EIS is intended to provide decisionmakers and the public with a complete and objective evaluation of significant environmental impacts, both beneficial and adverse, resulting from the proposed action and other reasonable alternatives. Environmental assessments can, on occasion, be quite lengthy and as complex as EISs but normally are much shorter analyses completed within the year in which they are initiated. Some EAs initiated late in the year will be carried over into the following year. Categorical exclusions are checklists that cover activities in categories established in regulation or policy that have been found through past analyses to not have significant effects on the human environment. Projects are documented on a CX form and no environmental analysis is required.

II. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENTS

The Rawlins Field Office had the lead for, or participated in, the following EIS level projects during the past year. An EIS is required when the proposed project under analysis is known (from past experience with similar projects) to cause significant environmental impacts or it is anticipated that the project will result in significant environmental impacts.

- 1. Continental Divide/Wamsutter II (CD/WII) Natural Gas Project** - The CD/WII project comprises approximately 1,061,200 acres, of which 531,400 acres are federal surface, 9,800 acres are state surface, and 520,000 acres are private surface. The project area is located on lands administered by the BLM Rawlins Field Office and the Rock Springs Field Office. Over 845 wells have previously been drilled within the proposed project area. The project area is located approximately 25 miles west of Rawlins and 40 miles east of Rock Springs and is bisected by Interstate Highway 80.

The CD/WII project is a proposal of Amoco Production Company, Union Pacific Resources Company, Yates Petroleum Corporation, Snyder Oil Corporation, and other companies.

The proposed action is to drill and develop approximately 3,000 well locations (1,500 on federal lands and 1,500 on private lands) and associated facilities (e.g., pipelines, roads, production facilities) beginning in 2000 and continuing for the next 10-20 years. The Proposed Action,

two alternative development strategies [i.e., Alternative A--14.0-acre maximum surface disturbance per section in sensitive resource areas (SRAs), and Alternative B--30.0-acre maximum surface disturbance per section in SRAs], and a No Action Alternative have been analyzed.

Public scoping (public involvement effort) to determine issues and concerns to be addressed in this EIS began on March 6, 1995. Due to a change in the extent of the project, public scoping was reinitiated on May 30, 1997. Additionally, two public scoping meetings were held to provide further opportunity for public comment.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was made available for public review on April 30, 1999, and public meetings were held on May 24 and 25, 1999.

In regard to issues of threatened and endangered plant and animal species, the BLM initiated formal consultation and conference with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on November 11, 1999, to evaluate protective measures for black-footed ferret (listed specie) and mountain plover (proposed listed specie). The biological opinion is still pending.

The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) was issued December 10, 1999, for a 30-day comment period.

In addition to public scoping and EIS document reviews, a Transportation Planning Group comprised of county, state, federal, industry, and private groups and/or individuals was organized in 1998. This was a direct result of the Proposed Action mitigation for Transportation Planning as addressed in Appendix A of the DEIS. A memorandum of understanding was developed and signed to further define the goals and objectives of this planning group. The group has been meeting twice yearly to address current needs and issues in the project area.

Action has also been taken to develop a formal cooperative agreement between industry, state and federal agencies to better address monitoring and protection of wildlife within the project area. Final agreement and signature on the document is still pending. This initiative was a direct result of Proposed Action mitigation as outlined in the Wildlife Protection Plan (DEIS, Appendix D).

The Record of Decision for this project is pending the receipt of the biological opinion from the USFWS. Regulation allows a maximum of 135 days to render an opinion. Should the 135-day time frame be used, a Record of Decision would most likely be issued by April 2000.

Contact: Clare Miller, Team Lead (307) 328-4245

- 2. South Baggs Area Natural Gas Development Project** - The South Baggs Area Natural Gas Development Project EIS analyzes the impacts of drilling and production operations for a project in southcentral Wyoming. The project is located in Carbon County, Wyoming, within Townships 12 and 13 North, Ranges 92 and 93 West, 6th Principal Meridian. Merit Energy Company's South Baggs Area Natural Gas Development Project comprises approximately 12,352 acres of mixed federal, State, and private lands. The proposed action would increase natural gas production in the South Baggs project area by allowing the operators to drill and develop approximately 50 natural gas wells in addition to existing operations within the project area. Total life expectancy of the South Baggs Natural Gas Production Area is estimated to be approximately 35 years.

The DEIS was made available for public review on April 29, 1999, and a public meeting was held on June 22, 1999.

The Final EIS, including the updated air quality analysis, is expected to be available for public review during April 2000. Consultation with the USFWS on the biological assessment is ongoing. Results of consultation will be presented in a USFWS biological opinion that will be included as an appendix to the eventual Record of Decision for the project.

Contact: Larry Jackson, Team Lead, (307) 328-4231

3. **Elk Mountain Coal Mine (formerly Carbon Basin Coal Mine)** - On September 20, 1996, Ark Land Company of St. Louis, Missouri, filed an application with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to obtain a coal lease on approximately 4,145 acres of federal coal lands located in Carbon County, Wyoming. The BLM recommended that 1,280 acres containing approximately 59 million tons of in-place coal reserves be included in the lease tract to allow for a reasonable underground mine plan with enough reserves for a new mine start. The BLM also recommended that 190 acres with zero in-place tons be removed from the original lease application due to results found when applying the coal screening process. The tract, as amended by BLM, contained 5,205.565 acres and 65.8 million tons of recoverable coal using a combination of conventional surface, highwall, and underground techniques. Coal mining would be conducted by Arch of Wyoming, Inc., an affiliate of Ark Land Company. Arch of Wyoming has conducted coal mining operations in the Hanna Basin region of Carbon County, Wyoming, since 1972. The proposed mine would be located in an area referred to as the Carbon Basin, a large geologic structure located 5 miles northwest of the town of Elk Mountain, 13 miles southwest of the town of Medicine Bow, and 12 miles southeast of the town of Hanna, Wyoming. A draft EIS was completed and sent to the public for review in August 1998. The purpose of the EIS was to evaluate the environmental impacts of coal mining which could result from the issuance of this lease. The DEIS analyzed two alternatives. The No Action Alternative is a "no federal leasing" alternative rather than a "no mining" alternative. This assumption was made because 79% of the surface-minable coal within the project area is privately owned and is likely economical to mine without obtaining a federal coal lease. However, if no federal coal were leased, the private underground coal reserves would become uneconomical to mine due to the checkerboard pattern of mineral ownership.

Under the Proposed Action, the BLM would hold a competitive lease sale for surface and underground minable federal coal lands. The Proposed Action includes the analysis of leasing federal coal for both surface and underground mining operations and examines ten options for transporting coal to processing/loadout facilities. Thirteen letters were received commenting on the content of the DEIS. These letters, the public hearing transcript, and BLM responses to the comments were included in an abbreviated final EIS which was sent out for public review the first week of January 1999. Five comment letters were received on the FEIS. These were responded to in the Record of Decision signed by the BLM Wyoming State Director on June 18, 1999. The decision recommended that a competitive lease sale be held for federal coal tract WYW139975 and that the lease be issued to the successful qualified bidder if the highest bid meets or exceeds fair market value of the tract as determined by the BLM, and if all other leasing requirements are met. The decision also stated that all of the transportation options presented in the EIS are available for further consideration during the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality (WDEQ) mine permitting process. A competitive sale

was held on September 29, 1999, at the BLM Wyoming State Office, Cheyenne, Wyoming. Ark Land Company, the only bidder, submitted a bid of \$1,957,456 (\$376 per acre) for the coal lease tract. The BLM determined that the bid met fair market value and after Department of Justice review, federal coal lease WYW139975 was issued to Ark Land Company effective December 1, 1999.

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4. **Desolation Flats Natural Gas Development Project** - On March 16, 2000, Marathon Oil Company, on behalf of itself and other operators, filed a letter with the Bureau of Land Management indicating its intent to explore for and develop natural gas resources in south-central Wyoming. The project area falls approximately within Townships 14-16 North and Ranges 94-96 West. Marathon; EOG Resources, Inc.; Tom Brown, Inc.; Basin Exploration, Inc.; Questar Exploration and Production Company; Merit Energy Company; and Santa Fe Snyder Corporation have indicated that approximately 385 wells on 361 well locations may be drilled in the approximately 232,000 acre Desolation Flats Project Area (DFPA). The Mulligan Draw EIS Area is included as part of the DFPA due to concerns that exploration/development within the Mulligan Draw EIS area is occurring in multiple formations and may advance beyond the one well per section spacing analyzed in the Mulligan Draw EIS. The Dripping Rock EA is included as part of the DFPA due to the outdated nature of the environmental analysis. The companies project that development activity would continue for approximately 20 years with a 30-50 year life-of-project. Various associated facilities (e.g., roads, pipelines, power lines, water wells, disposal wells, evaporation ponds, compressor stations, gas processing facility) would also be constructed throughout the DFPA. Exploration and delineation activities would be allowed to continue under an interim development plan. A public scoping effort to identify issues and concerns to be addressed in the EIS is anticipated to begin during the second quarter of 2000.

Contact: John Spehar, Team Lead (307) 328-4264

III. ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENTS

The Rawlins Field Office initiated 233 environmental assessments during 1999. An EA must be prepared for proposed actions that are not exempt from NEPA, have not been categorically excluded, have not been covered by an existing environmental analysis, and do not normally or obviously require an EIS. An EA may be prepared for any action at any time to assist in planning and decision-making. It provides sufficient evidence and analysis of impacts on the quality of the human environment to support a determination of no significant impacts or a determination to prepare an EIS.

Environmental assessments are not normally sent out to the general public for review but are made available for review in the Rawlins Field Office, upon request. However, certain actions are of major interest or of sufficient scope to warrant specific mention in this report. The following EAs either have had formal public review because of the level of public interest or are projects that transect southern Wyoming but are not expected to have significant impacts. Any project can receive informal public review by contacting this office. Formal public review can also be requested.

1. **Continental Divide National Scenic Trail (CDNST)** - The Rawlins and Lander Field Offices completed the designation of an on-the-ground route for the CDNST from South Pass City, Wyoming, to the Medicine Bow/Routt National Forest, south of Rawlins, Wyoming. The newly-signed route follows existing trails and primitive two-track roads on over 95% of its approximately 160 miles of public land. On the remaining 5% the route follows improved BLM

or county road rights-of-way. For 15 miles both north and south of Rawlins, designation of a route was deferred due to the "checkerboard" land pattern of public and private lands. The Rawlins Field Office is discussing the opportunity for consolidation of public lands along U.S. Highway 287 to the north and Wyoming Highway 71 to the south with a private landowner. This action will be analyzed in a separate environmental assessment to be prepared should there be a proposed project. The Lander Field Office will issue a Decision Record in the late spring of 2000 on the final designation of a three mile segment of the trail west from South Pass City to Wyoming Highway 28. This short segment was a previously deferred designation pending a decision by the BLM Rock Springs Field Office and the Shoshone National Forest regarding the location of the CDNST through their jurisdictions.

Contact: Ray Hanson, Team Lead (307) 332-8420

2. Atlantic Rim Coalbed Methane Exploration Project

Stone & Wolf, LLC, has proposed to explore and potentially develop three coalbed methane areas, called "pods." The three pods would be located in an area beginning approximately 6 miles northeast of Baggs to 24 miles north of Baggs and east of Wyoming Highway 789. The total project area encompasses approximately 8,000 acres, of which 7,920 acres are federal surface and 80 acres are private surface.

The exploratory pod program would consist of drilling, completing, and producing approximately 32 wells in each pod for evaluation, with a spacing density of eight wells per section. The project would help the company determine: 1) which coals are gas productive, 2) economical drilling and completion techniques, 3) if dewatering of the coal can be achieved, and 4) what depths or pressure windows may be preferred to target economic gas production.

The Scoping Notice was mailed out to the public on February 25, 2000, and public meetings were held in Baggs, Wyoming, on March 15 and Rawlins, Wyoming, on March 16, 2000. The comment period for public scoping ended on April 1, 2000.

The environmental document will be prepared as an environmental assessment but may be advanced to the environmental impact statement level if significant issues result from public scoping or if the EA concludes that significant impacts are likely to occur. If the exploratory project is deemed successful, any development plans beyond the scope of the EA would require additional environmental analysis. It is anticipated that the Decision Record will be issued during the second quarter of 2000.

Contact: Brenda Vosika Neuman, Team Lead (307) 328-4389

3. Q Creek Ranch Cattle to Bison Conversion and Electric Fence Proposal - The Q Creek Land and Livestock Company, LLC (Q Creek), has asked to convert 700 animal units of cattle use in the Sullivan Allotment to bison use. In addition, Q Creek proposes to construct approximately 70 miles of electric fence on private, state, and BLM lands to control these bison. The Sullivan Allotment is located in northeastern Carbon County, beginning about 14 miles north of Medicine Bow, Wyoming, along Wyoming Highway 487, and continuing northwest along the highway and Wyoming Highway 77 for approximately 26 miles. Preliminary issues identified for this proposal include: wildlife passage/migration through electric fences, wildlife/bison conflicts, public access/safety through electric fences, public safety in relation to bison in allotment, and adjacent landowner concerns (bison control, animal health issues).

A public scoping notice for this project was sent out March 7, 2000. Public meetings were held on March 21 in Casper, Wyoming, March 22 in Medicine Bow, Wyoming, and March 23 in Cheyenne, Wyoming. The scoping period will end the second week of April and the environmental assessment should be completed by the middle of May.

Contact: Cheryl Newberry, Team Lead (307) 328-4228

4. **Snowy Range Vegetative Treatment EA** - The Rawlins Field Office, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, and the Medicine Bow National Forest are proposing to recreate historic burn frequencies in shrub areas of the Snowy Range, mainly in the Platte Valley and Sheep Mountain mule deer herd areas. The purpose of the treatment is to improve the quality of ungulate big game seasonal ranges. The goal is to create 25 different age classes of shrubs over a 25-year period. Prescribed burning would be the method of choice in most treatment areas, but herbicide or mechanical treatments could be implemented in selected areas where burning is not feasible.

The environmental assessment will be a programmatic document and will analyze the more general aspects of the proposal. More detailed, site-specific analysis will be prepared for each individual treatment.

Contact: Mary Apple, Team Lead (307) 328-4329

5. **Pioneer Pipeline Project** - Pioneer Pipe Line Company has proposed construction of a new 12-inch diameter buried petroleum products pipeline from the Sinclair Refinery in Sinclair, Wyoming, to an existing block valve near Croydon, Utah. An existing pipeline along the same general Interstate 80 route has proven to be of insufficient capacity to meet the needs of petroleum product demand in Utah and would be taken out of service if the proposed line is approved. The proposed pipeline would provide product to Rock Springs and Little America, Wyoming, and Salt Lake City, Utah. The proposed pipeline would be approximately 262 miles long (230 miles in Wyoming and 32 miles in Utah) and would traverse portions of Carbon, Sweetwater, and Uinta Counties in Wyoming, and Summit, Rich, and Morgan Counties in Utah. The pipeline would cross approximately 86 miles of BLM-administered land in Wyoming. The Rock Springs Field Office has the lead for this project. The Kemmerer Field Office and Rawlins Field Office are responsible for review of the EA and consideration of impacts on public land within their respective field office jurisdictions. A public scoping effort for this project was begun on July 16, 1999. The EA is expected to be available for review by the public during April 2000.

Contact: Janelle Wrigley, Team Lead (307) 328-4279

Following issuance of our first NEPA report in March 1996, we received comments from various entities asking for additional information on environmental assessments for project proposals. In past years we included a map and table that provided additional information on our non-energy related environmental documents and projects. This year we have placed our NEPA log on the website along with this report. This information will allow the public to comment on proposals or request additional information on specific projects in locations or general areas of interest to them within the Rawlins Field Office management area. Also, listing our NEPA log on the website will allow us to list projects as early as possible in the planning cycle to assure that public comment is received in a timely manner.

IV. CATEGORICAL EXCLUSIONS

Categorical exclusions are categories of actions for the BLM which the Department of the Interior, in consultation with the Council on Environmental Quality, has determined to not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment (individually or cumulatively) and for which, therefore, neither an EA or EIS is generally required. A categorical exclusion review requires an assurance of conformance with the land use plan, identification of the appropriate exclusion category for the project, and a review of exceptions to categorical exclusions which would require preparation of an EA or EIS. Actions which were initiated by the Rawlins Field Office that met the categorical exclusion criteria included fence removal, road maintenance, and installation of gas well production facilities on existing well pads. The Bureau does not require that categorical exclusion documentation be tracked by the field offices; therefore, we will not provide the number of categorical exclusion reviews completed by the Rawlins Field Office in the future. However, the vast majority of the categorical exclusions completed were for actions related to the oil and gas industry.

VI. CONCLUSION

We can reasonably anticipate that roughly the same number and type of projects and environmental documents will be proposed during 2000. Because of the large number of activities and the regular acceptance of new proposals, it is impossible to predict the type and level of all environmental documents that will be prepared during the year.

Our procedure for soliciting public involvement for new projects is to assess the type of activity and level of analysis required. Scoping statements are prepared and mailed for all EISs, potential RMP amendments, and non-routine actions such as land exchanges. In addition, notices of actions of this magnitude are also published in newspapers and, if required, in the *Federal Register*. You can add your name to our mailing list for these types of actions by contacting our office. Scoping documents are not normally sent out for routine projects such as most range and wildlife projects or site-specific mineral development. We appreciate your comments on our annual report and hope to make future reports as useful to you as possible.

If any of the information provided is of interest to you, or if you would like additional information on any of the documents described above, please feel free to contact the Rawlins Field Office at the following address:

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Bureau of Land Management
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